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ABSTRACT

While open family communication about sexuality is generally considered beneficial, little research has examined characteristics of parents who talk to their children about sexuality. This study attempted to identify variables related to family discussions of sexuality in 290 college students and their parents. Both parents participated in 206 cases, although only 174 fathers and 175 mothers completed all scales used in the analysis. Parents and students completed similar measures of general sexual attitudes, erotophobia-erotophilia, social desirability, openness and problems in general family communication, sexual knowledge, sexual communication, intensity of religious beliefs, and demographic variables. Parents also indicated how much their own parents talked to them about each of nine sexual topics. Responses from families in which both parents participated revealed that, while openness in general family communication and previous sexual discussions with one's mother were related to communication about sex with one's own child for both parents, educational level and general sexual attitudes were related to sexual communication for fathers only. Sex of the child was related to level of sexual discussion for mothers only. Although fathers generally reported talking less to their children about sexuality than did mothers, fathers did not appear to selectively talk to sons only. Mothers were generally reponsible for discussing sexually-related topics with both sons and daughters, although mothers reported higher levels of discussion with daughters. (NB)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTS WHO TALK TO THEIR ADOLESCENT CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY

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CHARACTERISTICS OF PARENTS WHO TALK TO THEIR ADOLESCENT CHILDREN ABOUT SEXUALITY

While the exact benefits of parent-child communication about sexuality are still being debated, few would suggest that open family communication about aspects of human sexuality is not beneficial. Very few variables have been found, however, which serve to explain why some but not all parents talk to their children about sex, or which even differentiate between these two groups. In 1981, Fox reviewed the research and concluded that generally race, income, marital status, education, and sex-role traditionality were significantly related to family sexual communication. Since that time, very little research examining the characteristics of parents who talk to their children about sexuality has been published. No attempt seems to have been made to analyze possible predictors of family communication about sexuality in a multivariate fashion. It was, therefore, the purpose of the following study to try to pinpoint which, if any, of the variables suggested by previous research or common sense might be related to family discussions of sexuality, while holding each of the other factors constant.

Method

Subjects were 290 college students between the ages of 18 and 23 and the parents of these students. Both parents participated in 206 cases, although only 174 of the fathers and 175 of the mothers completed all of the scales used in the multivariate analysis. In the remaining families, one parent participated in the study. Ninety-one percent of the students who were asked to participate in the study accepted a set of

questionnaires, and 83% of them returned the completed forms. Participation in the study fulfilled a research requirement for a General Psychology course.

Both parents and students completed similar questionnaires which contained a measure of general sexual attitudes (the Sexual Attitude Scale, Hudson & Nurius, 1983), a measure of the dimension of erotophobia-erotophilia (the Sexual Opinion Survey, Fisher, Byrne, & White, 1983), a social desirability scale (Crowne & Marlowe, 1964), a measure of openness and problems in general family communication (the Parent-Adolescent Communication Scale, Olson et al., 1982), a sexual knowledge test (the Miller-Fisk, Gough, 1974), a sexual communication scale (Fisher, 1987), an indication of the intensity of religious beliefs (Mahoney, 1980), and various demographic questions. In addition, parents were asked to indicate how much their own parents had talked to them about each of nine sexual topics.

Results

Although analyses have been done using the entire group of subjects, in this paper, only the analysis utilizing the families in which both parents participated will be reported.

To avoid the problem of whether to use parents' reports or students' reports of the communication measures, composite scores for family communication about sexuality and openness and problems in general family communication were developed by adding together parents' and students' reports.

A multiple regression analysis was done separately for mothers and fathers using the variables of sex of the child, the

score on the Sexual Attitude Scale, the score on the Sexual Opinion Survey, the social desirability score, sexual knowledge, openness in general communication, problems in general communication, intensity of religious beliefs, frequency of church attendance, educational level, family income, amount the parent talked to his/her mother about sexual topics, and the amount the parent talked to his/her father about sexual topics. The dependent variable in each analysis was the composite score of communication about sex with the participating adolescent child.

For the fathers, the multiple R was .66 (N = 174) and the significant predictors were score on the Sexual Attitude Scale, openness in general family communication, education level, and amount that sexual topics were discussed with the fathers' own mothers. The direction of these relationships is as one might expect, with fathers being more likely to discuss sexuality with their children if their sexual attitudes were more liberal, general family communication was more open, educational level was higher, and sex was discussed more with the father's mother.

The multiple R for the mothers was .63 (N = 175) with the significant predictors being sex of the child, openness in general family communication, and amount that sexual topics were discussed with the mothers' mothers. These relationships, too, were in a predictable direction, with mothers being more likely to discuss sex if their child was a daughter, if general family communication was open, and if they had talked to their own mothers about sexuality. The significant unstandardized and standardized coefficients for both mothers and fathers are shown

in Table 1.

Discussion

While openness in general family communication and previous sexual discussions with one's mother are factors that are related to communication about sex with one's own child for both fathers and mothers, educational level and general sexual attitudes are only related to sexual communication for fathers. On the other hand, sex of the child was only related to level of sexual discussion for the mothers. Fathers generally talk much less to their children about sexuality than do mothers, but it appears that those who are inclined to have sexual discussions with their children do not selectively talk to their sons. Sex education is generally perceived as being primarily the realm of the same-sexed parent, but in reality, it is the mothers who generally are responsible for discussing sexually related topics with both sons and daughters, even though they are likely to have higher levels of discussion with their daughters.

While the results of the study pointed out several significant predictors of family discussions about sexuality for mothers and for fathers, none were very surprising. What was more intriguing is that when each variable was held constant in a multivariate regression analysis, even some of the variables which have previously been shown to be related to family sexual communication ceased to be significant predictors (income, mother's education, religiosity, sexual knowledge). On the other hand, previous research (Fisher, 1987) has failed to find a significant relationship between family sexual communication and

the quality of general family communication, but in this multivariate analysis, these two variables appear to be strongly related.

While the present study helps to clarify some of the variables which seem to determine which parents will talk to their children about sexuality and which ones will not, more work is necessary in order to have a greater understanding of parent-child communication about sexuality and how to best encourage it.

Table 1

Significant Unstandardized and Standardized Coefficients from Multiple Regression Analysis to Predict Communication with Adolescent Child about Sex for Fathers and for Mothers

Variable	Unstandardized Coefficient	Standardized Coefficient	p
	Fathers		
Sexual Attitude Scale Score[a]	-.160	-.175	.042
Openness in General Family Communication[b]	.467	.477	.000
Amount Talked to Own Mother About Sex	.880	.347	.000
Education	.789	.142	.037
	Mothers		
Gender of Child[c]	10.047	.321	.000
Openness in General Family Communication[b]	.508	.430	.000
Amount Talked to Own Mother About Sex	.362	.178	.013

Note. N = 174 for fathers and N = 175 for mothers.

[a] Higher scores indicate greater sexual conservatism.

[b] Higher scores indicate more open communication.

[c] This variable was coded as 1 = male and 2 = female.

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